

# Public Television Stations in the Digital Age

## FCC Consumer Facts

### Background

In October 2001, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) adopted rules governing public television stations' use of digital technology. Public TV stations, like commercial TV stations, are in the process of converting to digital television (DTV). Today, more than 85% of public TV stations are on the air with a digital signal.

### What Digital Television Means to You

Digital television will allow public TV stations to provide even more educational programming than they now offer. Digital technology will allow them to transmit programming with higher resolution for dramatically better picture and sound quality than what is available on today's analog system. This includes "high definition television," or HDTV, which has theater-quality pictures and CD-quality sound. Additionally, it will enable them to transmit several different programs at once in standard definition format. This is called "multicasting." Digital technology can also be used to transmit large amounts of data to a viewer's computer or television set.

When the DTV rules were being developed, the FCC decided to give broadcasters a great amount of flexibility to encourage their development of innovative services. The FCC rules require broadcasters to provide at least one free video programming stream of at least the same quality we see today.

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Beyond that, they are free to offer a wide range of services that are "ancillary or supplementary" to their free video programming service. If they provide certain types of ancillary or supplementary services, like subscription channels, they must pay a fee of 5% of the gross revenues generated by those services to the U.S. Treasury.

The FCC has concluded that this flexibility must not be allowed to jeopardize the noncommercial and educational mission of public TV. Therefore, in addition to having to provide at least one free video programming service like all TV broadcasters, public TV stations must use all of their digital capacity to provide a primarily noncommercial, nonprofit, educational broadcast service. This means that a "substantial majority" of all of their DTV services must be noncommercial. In addition, they are prohibited from airing advertisements, or commercials, during all of their free broadcast television services. Like commercial broadcasters, if they choose to provide ancillary services that generate revenues, they will have to pay a fee of 5% of those revenues to the U.S. Treasury.



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